



# ACADEMY *of* IDEAS

FREE MINDS FOR A FREE SOCIETY



“. . .you must look at who you are and make an effort to know yourself, which is the most difficult knowledge one can imagine. When you know yourself, you will not puff yourself up like the frog who wanted to be the equal of the ox. . .”

*Don Quixote, Miguel de Cervantes*

From an early age most of us are taught the value of honesty and we are swift to cast scorn on the liars who walk among us. Yet, in a striking paradox, many who claim to be honest in their interactions with others fall prey to the most insidious form of dishonesty: that of lying to one's self. In this video we explore the phenomenon of self-deception and examine how it paves the way for broken relationships and a ruined life.

“Nothing is so difficult as not deceiving oneself.”

*Ludwig Wittgenstein, Culture and Value*

Deception is a two-faced phenomenon. On the one hand there is explicit lying, where we tell a lie to another person, but know that we are lying. On the other hand, there is self-deception, where we tell a lie, either to ourselves or to another, but we believe the lie we tell. It is easy to understand why people tell explicit lies – for even if immoral, an explicit lie can help us to evade responsibility, avoid difficult confrontations, or gain the favor of another. But why do we lie to ourselves?

We lie to ourselves because it is one of the most effective defensive mechanisms against painful thoughts, emotions, and beliefs. Whether mental pain is triggered by a sense of personal inadequacy, feelings of inferiority, self-loathing, guilt, or shame, self-deception helps us escape these feelings. Self-deception also reduces the mental discomfort that accompanies cognitive dissonance, or as Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson write in *Mistakes Were Made (but Not By Me)*:

“The engine that drives [self-deception], the energy that produces the need to justify our actions and decisions—especially the wrong ones—is the unpleasant feeling . . . called “cognitive dissonance.” Cognitive dissonance is a state of tension that occurs when a person holds two cognitions (ideas, attitudes, beliefs, or opinions) that are psychologically inconsistent with each other, such as “Smoking is a dumb thing to do because it could kill me” and “I smoke two packs a day.” Dissonance produces mental discomfort that ranges from minor pangs to deep anguish; people don’t rest easy until they find a way to reduce it.”

*Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson, Mistakes Were Made (but Not By Me)*

Cognitive dissonance is pervasive in the human experience. For example, it arises if we have harmed another, but believe ourselves to be good. It will be triggered if we are stuck in a dead-end job, yet believe we are smart and capable. Or it may emerge if we think we are a person of value, but are in a relationship with an abusive or disloyal partner. To reduce the cognitive dissonance triggered by situations like these, we can take healthy actions that address the root cause of our mental anguish. We can apologize for a wrong done to another, we can cultivate skills that make a new career possible, or we can end a toxic relationship. But taking these constructive steps often requires courage, discipline, and hard work and so the easy way out of resolving our dissonance with self-deception can prove tempting. We can tell ourselves that the other person deserved the wrong we did to them, that our dead-end job provides us with security, or that our relationship isn’t toxic as we deserve our partner’s anger. These self-deceptions allow us to escape the anguish of cognitive dissonance without making any real changes to our life.

Everyone takes the easy way out at times, but if self-deception becomes chronic and the primary way we deal with mental pain, we begin down a path that can easily ruin our life. For each lie we tell ourselves to escape awareness of the existence of a problem, is a step taken away from the path of self-development. Each time we deceive ourselves to diminish the uncomfortable feelings of cognitive dissonance, our problems and difficulties go unresolved, and we set ourselves up for greater suffering down the line. Or as Travis and Aronson explain:

“. . .mindless [self-deception], like quicksand, can draw us deeper into disaster. It blocks our ability to even see our errors, let alone correct them. It distorts reality, keeping us from getting all the information we need and assessing issues clearly. It prolongs and widens rifts between lovers, friends, and nations. It keeps us from letting go of unhealthy habits.”

*Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson, Mistakes Were Made (but Not By Me)*

The more the quicksand of self-deception pulls us down, the more we limit our potential. But self-deception, is more than just self-limiting. It also impedes the cultivation, and maintenance, of healthy relationships and in extreme cases can motivate us to commit acts of cruelty toward innocent victims. To understand how self-deception harms interpersonal relationships, we need to recognize that one of the most common ways that we deceive ourselves is through the manipulation of our memories. We can be selective as to what we remember and denying that something has happened is one of the most effective means to reduce cognitive dissonance. For example, if we have wronged someone and feel guilty about it, instead of apologizing and making amends, we can deny that the event ever happened, or as Nietzsche put:

“I have done it, says my memory. I cannot have done it, says my pride and remains inexorable. Finally, the memory gives way.”

*Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil*

Manipulating our memories to deceive ourselves goes further than mere denial of a memory, many people will go as far as to create false memories to diminish mental pain and to resolve cognitive dissonance. For example, if cognitive dissonance is triggered by the contradictory beliefs that (a) we are a smart and capable person and (b) our life is a mess, we have a few options to quell the mental anguish of our cognitive dissonance. We can take steps to straighten out our life, or we can blame our current situation on events of the past and even if our past wasn't bad enough to excuse our current problems, we can deceive ourselves with false memories to convince ourselves it was. With false memories we can turn our past into a horror show of abuse, trauma, and cruel twists of fate, that makes our current life situation not a disappointment, but an accomplishment, given what we tell ourselves we went through. Or as Travis and Aronson explain in *Mistakes Were Made (but Not By Me)*:

“Why would people claim to remember that they had suffered harrowing experiences if they hadn't, especially when that belief causes rifts with families or friends? By distorting their memories, these people can get what they want by revising what they had, and what they want is to turn their present bleak or merely mundane lives into dazzling victories over adversity. Memories of abuse also help them resolve the dissonance between “I am a smart, capable person” and “My life sure is a mess right now” with an explanation that makes them feel better about themselves and removes responsibility. . .”

*Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson, Mistakes Were Made (but Not By Me)*

Another way self-deception harms relationships was identified by Fyodor Dostoevsky. In his book *Demons*, one of the characters, Fedka the Convict, observes how the protagonist, Pyotr Stepanovich, “invents a man and then lives with him”. What he meant by this was that instead of looking at someone in a clear and objective manner, and evaluating their character based on their behaviors and actions, sometimes we create, or invent, a fictitious characterization of another to justify how we treat them. In Dostoevsky's book *The Brothers Karamazov*, he gives an example of this form of self-justification in action. When one of the characters is asked why he hates someone so much and he answers:

“I'll tell you. He has done me no harm. But I played him a dirty trick, and ever since I have hated him.”

*Fyodor Dostoevsky, The Brothers Karamazov*

Creating a fictitious characterization of another person to justify mistreating them, sets us down a dangerous path. In *Mistakes Were Made (But Not By Me)*, Tavris and Aronson provide an example of how this process can unfold:

“Take a boy who goes along with a group of his fellow seventh graders who are taunting and bullying a weaker kid who did them no harm. The boy likes being part of the gang but his heart really isn’t in the bullying. Later, he feels some dissonance about what he did. “How can a decent kid like me,” he wonders, “have done such a cruel thing to a nice, innocent little kid like him?” To reduce dissonance, he will try to convince himself that the victim is neither nice nor innocent: “He is such a nerd and a crybaby. Besides, he would have done the same to me if he had the chance.” Once the boy starts down the path of blaming the victim, he becomes more likely to beat up on the victim with even greater ferocity the next chance he gets.”

*Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson, Mistakes Were Made (but Not By Me)*

This dynamic of a nice kid becoming a bully by convincing himself that the victim deserved it, is the same dynamic that occurs at a collective level when normal people scapegoat an ethnic, religious, or political minority. The scapegoating process typically begins with minor transgressions being committed against the scapegoated group. Perhaps the group is banned from certain places or stripped of certain rights. An act of justification usually follows these initial transgressions, whereby the scapegoated group is demonized in the minds of the aggressors with words and accusations. For example, the scapegoats may be labelled as degenerate, disease ridden, or a threat to society, or they will be accused of fictitious crimes. This demonization process paves the way for even worse acts of aggression to follow and if this process, which the psychologist Ervin Staub called a “continuum of destruction”, is not halted, the end result can be horrifying, as evidenced in the totalitarian states of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

“One psychological consequence of harm-doing is further devaluation of victims... people tend to assume that victims have earned their suffering by their actions or character.”

*Ervin Staub, The Psychology of Good and Evil*

Given that self-deception limits our potential, ruins relationships, and can turn us into a man or woman capable of inflicting serious harm on innocent victims, if we wish to live a fulfilling life and to contribute to the uplifting of others, not to tearing them down, we should limit the degree to which we lie to ourselves.

Sometimes, escape from the quicksand of self-deception occurs when we hit rock bottom, and our illusions are shattered against our will. But this is a dangerous means of escape as the attempt to rebuild a broken life is an arduous task. It is far better to voluntarily break our illusions through a ruthless attempt at self-honesty. For as Carl Jung noted:

“A visible enemy is always better than an invisible one. In this case I can see no advantage whatever in behaving like an ostrich. It is certainly no ideal for people...to live in a perpetual state of delusion about themselves, foisting everything they dislike onto their neighbours and plaguing them with their prejudices and projections.”

*Carl Jung, The Practice of Psychotherapy*

When we break the habit of self-deception, life unfolds with a newfound ease as we are no longer burdened by the convoluted web of falsehoods we once spun. Freed from the exhausting need to layer deceit upon deceit we can devote more energy toward accomplishing meaningful goals. When

we stop lying to ourselves about how we treat others, we cease sabotaging our relationships, and we avoid the perilous path of scapegoating. Ultimately, abandoning self-deceit is an act of self-emancipation as greater honesty frees us to heed the age-old wisdom to know thyself.

“To this day I have deceived others and myself; I have suffered for it, and my suffering was cheap and vulgar. . .I’m glad that I see my faults clearly, that I am conscious of them. This will help me to reform and become a different man.”

*Anton Chekov, The Duel*